

Washington, DC - Rep. Linda T. Sánchez (D-CA) today applauded the enactment of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which will extend protections to victims of violent crimes committed on the basis of a person's actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and/or disability. It also strengthens existing hate crimes protections for a variety of other categories, including race, color, religion, national origin, and ethnicity.

“After years of opposition, we’ve finally passed inclusive hate crimes legislation to protect Americans from hateful acts of violence no matter what color they are, who they love, or how they pray,” said Rep. Linda Sánchez. “I applaud President Obama for signing this legislation protecting our constituents and making our community and our country a better place to live.”

Despite the pervasiveness of the problem, current law limits federal jurisdiction over hate crimes to incidents against protected classes that occur only during the exercise of federally protected activities, such as voting. Further, the statutes do not permit federal involvement in a range of cases where crimes are motivated by bias against the victim’s perceived sexual orientation, gender, disability or gender identity. This loophole is particularly significant given the fact that four states have no hate crime laws on the books, and another 21 states have extremely weak hate crimes laws.

“In the Matthew Shepard case, the local sheriff’s department nearly went bankrupt trying to pursue the case,” continued Sánchez. “Now, with this new legislation, federal authorities will be able to assist local ones, and even our most vulnerable neighbors will know they have access to justice, no matter where they live.”

The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act was included in the National Defense Authorization Act, which President Obama signed into law today. Rep. Sánchez, a founding member of the Congressional LGBT Equality Caucus, was particularly pleased that the legislation included protection for transgender Americans.